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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Dr. Wally N'DOW**
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JOURNALISTS: Rob Watson, BBC
Tuyet Nguyen, United Press International

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HABITAT II

Dr. Wally N'DOW, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and Secretary-General of the Habitat II conference, discusses the modern human habitat situation and trends. Cities play a significant role in development and continue to attract migrants from rural areas seeking a better life. The high rate of urban population growth has put increasing pressure on infrastructure and resources. Habitat II focuses on people and their relationship with their living environment. It aims to encourage Governments and local authorities to embark on partnerships with civic leaders, non-governmental organizations and scientific and educational establishments to improve management of cities and to find solutions to their problems. Improving employment opportunities and living conditions in rural areas could discourage people from migrating to already over-crowded urban centres.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

With the world population exceeding 6 billion people, the lack of housing is becoming one of the most pressing problems on the planet. Today, over a billion people world-wide live in substandard housing, often without safe water or adequate roads, electricity, schools and health facilities. And more than 100 million people are truly homeless. All around the world, the housing problem contributes to epidemics, crime and social unrest, as well as degradation of the environment. To address this problem and to work together to find solutions, the world community has decided to convene the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, or Habitat II.

Our guest today, Dr. Wally N'Dow, is Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and Secretary-General of the Habitat II conference. Joining me to talk with Dr. N'Dow are Rob Watson of the BBC and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International.

Dr. N'Dow, welcome to World Chronicle.

N'DOW: Thank you very much, Michael.

LITTLEJOHNS: For starters, Dr. N'Dow, tell us a bit about the UN Centre for Human Settlements, which I believe is located in Nairobi. What do you actually do there?

N'DOW: This is the focal point of all the UN's efforts at contributing to the improvement of human settlements world-wide. This is the arm of the UN that is concerned with assisting Member States in the design of their urban and housing policies, in the training of personnel, in the strengthening of institutions, and in the conduct of research related to better standards of living physically in towns and cities and villages the world over.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now, are your activities – you say the world over, I mean, your activities, although world-wide, I presume concentrate mainly on the developing countries?

N'DOW: This is where the needs are greatest. Our work, however, extends.... Particularly in terms of research, in terms of analysis and development of concepts and tools, we collaborate very fully with the so-called developed parts of the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, those of us who live in New York might think that the needs of New York City are quite acute, too. But, on the other hand, I wonder if Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, whose management of this city is the subject of some criticism in some quarters, would – and praise in others – would perhaps look kindly on advice from the United Nations.

N'DOW: I don't know whether he will seek or whether he needs advice from the United Nations. One thing he does certainly need is collaboration with the rest of the international system in addressing the problems of big cities, which New York City cannot be exempted from. There are problems everywhere in the world that relate to cities, not only the traditional challenges of infrastructure and difficulties related to the management of services, but the social agenda of cities, the social difficulties that cities meet in their day-to-day existence.

WATSON: Can I kind of butt in at this point and try and start things off in a relatively controversial way? Wouldn't the best thing of all be to, say, to try and discourage people from living in large cities, to say that large cities in a way are, to some extent, dying institutions in the developed world, why encourage them in the developing world? Wouldn't it just be simpler to say "Stay in your villages, improve the economy, the agricultural economy"?

N'DOW: That's also a part of the message. We must, however, make the conditions in these so-called villages such that people can stay with them in circumstances that will allow them to express themselves with some satisfaction. The livability condition of the villages and the rural areas that you refer to is critical to getting to that point, but in realistic terms, when one confronts the reality of our present-day world, recent world history has shown us nobody has been able to keep people from moving. You're dealing with an almost indomitable human will to move to larger concentrations, either in search of physical security, in search of economic improvement in their lives and livelihoods, in search of jobs, in search of the very nature of what the city provides that makes that intermixing of ideas and excellence. The city has more attractions to it than just a physical location. So we have witnessed in the recent past a historical march almost towards the cities.

WATSON: So, in that case, seeing as it's pretty much accepted that one couldn't reverse urbanization, often at the UN, conferences, and the language of UN conferences go above the heads of most people who are not officials and diplomats. If you were to speak directly to someone who was homeless in a large Latin American city or African city or Asian city, what would you say to them directly, in language that they could understand, that Habitat II could do for them?

N'DOW: We would not only say to them, we would indicate to them, we would show to them examples of how they can live better in their own environment.

WATSON: Like what? What would you tell them?

N'DOW: We would tell them, for instance, that their participation in the life of their community and their neighbourhood, we would tell them that we have to ensure that they make their own contribution to the concepts that govern their own lives in the city; we would

encourage them to work within a social construct. We would try and work in partnership with others and say that for this community to continue to be viable, for this city to continue to function, and for the catastrophes that we know exist in the cities to be reduced if not eliminated, you need many more actors than just the people or than just the government.

WATSON: But presumably – that's all very well, I mean, I'm sure that lots of homeless people everywhere would prefer that the authorities running the city treated them better. But, I mean, in practical terms, what can they do? Are you saying that they should petition more to local authorities? What exactly does it mean?

N'DOW: They should organize. They should also – there is a responsibility that devolves to everyone, including the poor. We recognize that poverty has great constraints. We recognize great difficulties in these neighbourhoods that you are referring to. But we also know that there are other possibilities out there. If the actors – governments, the private sector, the civil society, NGOs, local authorities – make it possible to work together and encourage the participation of these people in the so-called poor areas, there will be a tremendous gain all around. Of course, they cannot solve their own problem. This is why the whole concept of this conference of Habitat II, which is in the making of partnerships as the way out of the crisis we face in the urban centres of the world, is so crucial. The partnerships to improve livelihoods and lives.

NGUYEN: Mr. N'Dow, when you talk about people going into the city to make a better life and so on, there is a reverse trend in cities in the developed world also, in the rich countries. People are leaving big cities into the countryside because they are fed up with the decay in big cities. So it is not a uniform trend around the world, where in poor countries people go to big cities to make a living, here people leave the cities to make a living. How do you explain this?

N'DOW: Very few people are really leaving the city as compared to the people who pour in. Of course, there is a movement back and forth. But it's a trickle compared to the floods of people that leave the so-called rural areas into the city, depending on the region. Europe is primarily fairly urbanized. Latin America is fastly becoming so. In the past 40 years we've seen the urbanization of Latin America. There's very little rural left. In Asia and Africa, you still have a lot of rural, you still have tremendous numbers of people coming in. This is why in many parts of the world the battle to improve the living conditions in the city and the battle to improve the living conditions of the rural area have to go hand in hand. Africa and Asia must continue to fight on those two fronts. And this is the message of the conference.

NGUYEN: I see you have more than 500 case studies of cities around the world. Have you seen any improvement in the past few years? Let's say, from the first Habitat. Are there big improvements in the developing world and their cities?

N'DOW: There are some. There are some improvements in certain cities. I can tell you of a city in Latin America, Curitiba in Brazil, a lot of things have improved. That has importantly to do with the confidence of participation – between the communities, between the people and the municipality and the government. A lot depends on that. A lot depends on the governance aspect of things. A lot depends of course on the resources. Another city which has done extremely well, in the developing world, that has maybe to do with resources, is Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, recognized by most people as having set the right priorities, invested properly, trained manpower in a technologically oriented way –

NGUYEN: But they have all the oil resources.

N'DOW: They have some resources. I said that. But there are others who have resources where this kind of process is not –

WATSON: Talking of those examples that you've mentioned –

N'DOW: Yes.

WATSON: I mean, to put it as simply as possible, what are the cities doing, what are the cities who are successful, what are they doing right, and what are the cities who are not successful doing wrong?

N'DOW: Basically it's prioritization, prioritization, setting off the major things that must be done by the city, by the community, by the leadership, by all the partners. That's critical. Governance is important. Institutions that work in managing these cities, and I must say also the towns, those institutions are critical. Thirdly, it's important that the whole concept of enablement, that the leaders in these cities and towns and mega-cities enable the participation of others other than themselves – the private sector involvement in the solution of these problems, the involvement certainly, very importantly, of the local authorities themselves at the level of governance lower than the central authorities.

WATSON: One thing that you haven't mentioned, I mean, you talk about good governance, presumably the opposite, which is seen in cities whether they be developed or developing, is of course corruption, politicians who award contracts to people who are their friends, politicians who would want to see things built in one part of the city to please their constituency.

N'DOW: There is that too. There is that too. This is all governance. Governance includes the management of resources, a better handling and husbanding of resources. And we don't have to spell out corruption the way you have done it, but governance, writ large, means all of those things and more. It means tolerance also. It means allowing people to

express themselves politically, to express themselves culturally, to feel at home in their own surroundings. The future will never be won unless the governance aspect, the management aspect, governance at the process level but in the management level – these things are very critical.

NGUYEN: Mr. N'Dow, the UN is also trying to solve poverty around the world. You are trying to bring to an end the housing crisis. Is there a linkage between all those programmes? I mean, which comes first? And can you solve the housing crisis without solving poverty?

N'DOW: You cannot solve the challenge, that is, you cannot resolve the poverty crisis, or even mitigate it, without people having shelter and roofs over their heads, in any society. This is critical.

NGUYEN: It looks like you have a priority.

N'DOW: It is critical. No way can you resolve the dilemmas we face in the big urban centres and in the developing world's cities when you don't address the conditions in which people live. Because out of that flows a whole spirit and a whole process of self improvement. It is critical. You cannot educate children when those children don't have a roof over their heads. You cannot even talk about families. You cannot talk about society.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Dr. Wally N'Dow, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and Secretary-General of the Habitat II conference.

WATSON: Well, I was just wondering how – and I'm sure that we'd all accept that every city would work better if it had more money, if it was better governed, if the people who lived there spoke up for themselves and business wasn't selfish and corrupt – but in what way can a UN conference bring any of those things about?

N'DOW: A UN conference is essentially a sharing of experience, of what has worked, what is likely to give results. These are consultations which allow us the opportunity to see across the border. By what processes can we improve our lot in my city? With what concepts will I move forward in the directions of improving jobs? What will be the ideas that will animate the running of my city better? How can I build those institutions? This is why this conference is very practical. We are talking about sharing good examples of what has worked, important to any concrete resolution of the crisis we face. This is important in this conference as well.

WATSON: In that case, to take a concrete example, I mean, just pick a city out of the hat, somewhere that's been through a difficult time recently, a Port-au-Prince: What would your advice be to the mayor of Port-au-Prince, the people of Port-au-Prince, and any businessmen there?

N'DOW: Not only Port-au-Prince, but to all mayors in those kinds of difficulties, we would say, allow other actors to come in; create the conditions that will allow your businesses to feel confident and work with you; get the NGOs and civil society to feel at home with you and work with you and contributing ideas to what you are doing. But more importantly, I think, more importantly, build and shape the institutions and give them the quality personnel, give them the right amount of instruments for them to be able to help you govern. Without this, no amount of resources will do the work.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, we haven't talked very much about mega-cities. I was looking at some of your literature and I noticed that Tokyo in 1995 was the largest city in the world with 26.8 billion – million, of course, population, and in 2015 it's predicted still to be the largest city in the world population-wise with 28.7 million; New York in '95 was 16.3 million – that means the New York metropolitan area – in third position; but in 2015, New York will not even be in the first 10.

N'DOW: That's right.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now, I mean, these enormous cities – Bombay, 27.4 million; Lagos, Nigeria, 24.4; Shanghai, 23.4 – how are these huge cities going to cope?

N'DOW: What that tells you –

LITTLEJOHNS: I mean, all the management in the world can't deal with that.

N'DOW: Some management can help a great deal. What that tells us is that in the next few decades most of the big, the real big mega-cities are in the developing parts of the world, where the resources–

LITTLEJOHNS: Except Tokyo.

N'DOW: Except Tokyo. Tokyo is the only city which by our projections will remain big even in 15, 20 years' time. But Tokyo does have resources. It's beginning to have its own problems, as you probably do know. There are some difficulties even in Tokyo. But the bulk of the challenge will be in developing country cities which today and in the near future do not have the resources to cope with such big challenges. This is why this conference is so crucial to the developing world as well. Managing those environments, dealing with the social catastrophes that we associate with big cities, under conditions where resources are inadequate, will be a very daunting task. So we are sharing experiences. This is why we are sharing experiences.

WATSON: Isn't the brutal way of putting it that cities which are rich and have lots of jobs do well; cities which are poor and where there aren't lots of jobs don't do well? And it's difficult to see how –

N'DOW: Traditionally this is the case, but you cannot stop at that. You can say how can we improve through partnerships the creation of livelihoods. And these things are

doable also. They may not resolve all these problems of society. But concentrating on priorities is essential. This is where the ranking of priorities at the level of governance of cities is so critical.

WATSON: That's quite a new departure, isn't it? Because the world's great cities – like New York, like London, like Paris – were not in any way planned cities; they were cities, original settlements, and then driven by the industrial revolution –

N'DOW: Well, that's why you had the crisis you had. I mean, London in the days of Charles Dickens was worse than Lagos in Nigeria at any time in its history. So this is why it's very important that we engage in this discussion institutions, the management of the cities, the management of the neighbourhoods, and the partnerships between all the actors. Now we have a double problem: the problem of environmental decay; the problem of pollution, including toxic pollution, in some of the big cities of the world; the problems of crime; the problems of drugs – these are terrible overlays on the traditional poverty environments that we know. So there is something in it for everyone. We say, for this conference, there is a South and a North. There are conditions that are mimicking Southern conditions that we find in the big cities of the industrialized world: pockets of great poverty, absolutely depravation, environments that are totally inhuman. This is why the Northern countries and industrialized countries too have such a great interest. Witness the participation in the preparatory process of the US, of Europe, of Japan, of all of these industrialized countries, because they know that the problems are not only at the level of the developing world.

NGUYEN: Mr. N'Dow, do you consider Singapore as one of the best cities in the world?

N'DOW: Singapore has certain aspects about it which are very encouraging. There is certainly good management, strong institutions; there is a great concern for the environment, for pollution; there is an attempt to do something about the traffic problems and the congestion. These are very good, very good –

NGUYEN: But they say also that Singapore has become such a sterile city, so well organized that you don't even know if you are human beings any more.

N'DOW: Well, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that all of these conditions are critical for success: improving the cleanliness of the city, for instance; reducing crime; reducing drug infestations; making sure that people are responsible and participate; making sure that people consider themselves citizens and not outlaws to the process. These are critical things. If I am going to fault any city, I would rather err on the positive side rather than look at what has to be given up to make the city livable.

WATSON: But to follow up on his point, I mean, it is really true, what Tuyet's – I mean, that certain cities, when you visit them, you can say they have a certain soul or a certain spirit. You'd associate Paris with romance; I'm not entirely sure what I'd associate London with. But you have certain associations with certain cities. It doesn't seem like those things can really be planned. And that's down to – it's something to do with the people that live there and the accidents which have created the city.

N'DOW: Well, cities are centres of great culture. Many old cities have had the time to be centres of culture, the flourishing of culture, learning, the arts, all of that. That takes time. But even in these cities where you have all of this, you also begin to have decay, including some of the cities you've referred to. There is a challenge there that we must all meet. There is homelessness even in these cities; there is great depravation, isn't there?

WATSON: Certainly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, you mentioned the social aspects. Here in the United States and, I believe, in Britain and probably many other countries in the northern hemisphere there's an increasing reluctance to devote taxes, money from taxes to social services, so-called "welfare", and a general effort to hold down taxes and therefore logically to hold down social services. Now, is this going to be a big problem in the future, do you think?

N'DOW: I think it's a problem already. I think the days are gone when one can say "The problems of others don't affect my life", especially if you live in the same habitat, the same city, the same town, the same neighbourhood. The problems of others have a tendency to rise like a tidal wave and hit you, even in your good neighbourhoods, where if you refuse to support the poorer parts of town you may end up having to deal with the social consequences of that. Your life may indeed become as unlivable as theirs. So indeed, this is very short-sighted view, that investment in the social sector is not a rewarding process. It is one way of ensuring stability, livability and the functioning of cities.

WATSON: But I think the problem with that – and this is the whole reason why there has been a move to the right in the developed world – is that people tend to think that money had been spent in social programmes, both in the United States and in Europe, and that public housing had decayed, people hadn't taken the benefits from it. And there's also a feeling among taxpayers – and I think this is really the core of the issue – that they just don't trust politicians to spend their money wisely on social programmes. I mean, that's the sort of fundamental breakdown in trust between taxpayers and the politicians.

N'DOW: Oh, that's a question of process; that's not a question of the principle. We're talking about the principle of investing in the social agenda as opposed to whether the process has gone awry. If the process doesn't function, change the process, don't attack the

principle. The principle of social investment is the only viable principle to ensure livability in the cities and the towns and the mega-cities in these neighbourhoods we know so well. So I think that the agenda here – this is what this conference is trying to address: How do we, even as we build a new future, seek new directions for human welfare? How do we bring back this idea not only of partnership but also of human solidarity? Housing, cities are not only bricks and mortar; a neighbourhood cannot be reduced just to houses and cars. Livability is very critical, the human bonds that keep societies together. This is importantly what this conference....

NGUYEN: Mr. N'Dow, if you are given a choice, which city would you like to live in?

N'DOW: If I'm given the choice, I would live in a hypothetical city where I have freedom of movement, where I have freedom of expression, where I am not living in a volatile social environment at physical risk, where I'm allowed to participate, where I can raise my family. And there are cities like that to varying degrees. Sharing these experiences teaches all others that these things are doable in spite of the difficulties of the process leading to success.

WATSON: Well, that narrows down the options, but have you got a couple in mind?

N'DOW: I would rather not say! I prefer to leave it –

LITTLEJOHNS: You already mentioned Dubai. Is that something –

N'DOW: Dubai – I like some of these cities that have done such great efforts, that have made such great contributions to livability –

WATSON: You didn't mention the weather, either.

N'DOW: The weather, well, the weather now –

LITTLEJOHNS: It's pretty hot in Dubai, I believe.

N'DOW: Not always. [LAUGH] I do think that this conference has a promise, not only in the pursuit of the narrow agenda of housing and urban, it has a promise because it is where all of the promises, all of the various agendas of the UN system will be played out.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. N'Dow, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

N'DOW: It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure.

LITTLEJOHNS: Our guest has been Dr. Wally N'Dow, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and Secretary-General of the Habitat II conference. He was interviewed by Rob Watson of the BBC and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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